
The Retreat of the Elephants

Is written and published in 2004 by a well-known Australian professor - Mark Elvin, who specialized in Chinese economic, cultural and environmental history. Chinese environmental history is comparatively tardy not only to the development of other categories of Chinese historiography but also to the western environmental history. Mark Elvin has given out a relatively concrete definition to 'environmental history', stating that, '[it] in the sense used here is limited to the period for which documentary evidence exists to give us access to how men and women were thinking. Its theme is the changing relationship between people and the biological, chemical, and geological systems that both supported them and threatened them in complex ways. In specific terms: climates, rocks and minerals, soils, water, trees and plants, animals and birds, insects, and, at the foundation of almost everything, microbes. All of these are in various ways both vital friends and, at times, lethal enemies. Technologies, economies, social and political institutions, as well as beliefs, perceptions, knowledge, and representations interacted continually with this natural context.' (P.XX) In other words, environmental history is inseparable towards any kind of human history. Environment and human are complimentary for forming history, but sometimes, they contradicted.

In this book, Mark Elvin is trying to illustrate the relationship between the retreating route of the elephants and human activities. He constructed it into three sections, including 'Patterns', 'Particularities' and 'Perceptions'. The first part would be a relatively descriptive and factual information in the change of route of the elephants from the north of China, better known as Beijing as the capital nowadays, gradually retreating southwards as well as westwards, covering in the period of three thousand years of history. The second part contained three case studies in Jiaying, Guizhou, and Zunhua, which have gone through a similar pattern of change, even though they were characteristically and geographically different from each other. In the third section, an analysis of the perception and the way of thinking in Chinese people towards the environment would be brought up. Last but not least, it would come to a short conclusion for stirring up the discussion on the degree of Chinese environmental pressure it used to have while making comparisons to the west in the 18th century. In the following essay, main arguments would be summarized along with the outlining three sections.

As for the first part, 'Patterns', Mark Elvin has given out a concrete topic sentence, 'Chinese farmers and elephants do not mix.' (P.9) there are six chapters in total that made up of the first part. In the first two chapters, a geographical and chronological framework is constructed in order to illustrate that elephants did make an appearance around the whole China and not being limited to space and time confinement few thousand years ago. However, elephants have been retreating continually to the southwest area from time to time. He admitted that the downward

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

changing climate cannot be disregarded to explain such a phenomenon. However, he then raised up a question that why the number of elephants which retreated southward due to climate change could not recover to the same quantity as before when the climate went back to normal? The influence of civilization practiced by human beings thus being brought up as the main argument in the following chapters. By the time when elephants have retreated southward and westward, the expansion of human settlement and civilization as well as the intensification of agricultural development were simultaneously dominated the original livelihood of the elephants. Elvin stated out three patterns of human domination over elephant's livelihood. First of all, the deforestation for the sake of agricultural expansion. Growing crops is essential to self-sustain for human settlement as well as civilization. When the population was increasing for centuries, the demand for flatlands for agricultural purpose leveled up as well, so that deforestation has been taken into practice. Deforestation appeared not only due to agricultural expansion but also for sustaining economic development, such as producing fuel for heating, cooking and industrial purposes, while a continued demand of timber for infrastructural use in construction, shipbuilding or bridge repairing, etc. It generated various problems towards the environment since the chemical components from insecticides on agriculture polluted soil which would create an irreversible environmental problem till now and onwards. Also, deforestation would change the ecological system, thus flooding would be occurred to lower flatlands or villages next to rivers. Secondly, elephants were hunted by farmers in order to avoid any loss and damage to properties that caused by the elephants. Some people hunted elephants for ivory and trunk to gain benefits, while some others domesticated elephants for war or transportation use. No matter which sector of human activities was involved, most of them were fatal to the elephants' habitats and their way of lives.

As for the second part, 'Particularities', Mark Elvin has shed a spotlight on three completely diversified regions, including Jiaying that located in the Yangzi River Delta, Guizhou that located in the southwestern region and Zunhua that located in the northeastern area. Mark Elvin has made a research of average lifespan of women among these regions. The research has found out that women in unpopulated Zunhua have the highest average of lifespan than women in Jiaying and Guizhou. They shared twice the average lifespan with Jiaying province which the people normally lived for 18-24 years from c.1800 AD and third of Guizhou province. In Zunhua, they had a mixed farming lifestyle who would grow crops as well as raising livestock, which could be seen as an ecological and sustainable development. In comparison to Jiaying province, lands are fully utilized for the agricultural purpose, so that 'there was virtually no longer any environmental resilience in the system.' (P.203) Hence, Mark Elvin is trying to say that the form of sustainable agricultural development is essential towards the improvement of human lives.

After giving us descriptive as well as valid and concrete arguments in the first two sections, Mark Elvin is trying to stir up discussion in the following section, 'Perceptions,' focusing on how

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

Chinese people perceived and interpreted the environment. Elvin answered, 'through more than three thousand years, the Chinese refashioned China. They cleared the forests and the original vegetation cover, terraced its hill-slopes, and partitioned its valley floors into fields.' (P.321) Chinese saw themselves as part of nature and environment, however, they refashioned it without hesitation in response to their political, economic, martial or other aims to improve their way of living. Chinese literati might illustrate their fondness with individual trees, but compose hatred towards forests. Elvin has suggested how and why Chinese people saw the environment this way with the linkage of Chinese traditional cultures and norms.

A 'Concluding Remarks' has come to an end for closing up his arguments as well as identifying all the subject matters that he brought up. Hereby, Elvin compared late Imperial China to the northwestern Europe to weight the pressure both of them put on towards the environment. He thus suggested that 'Chinese environment was under significant "pressure" from human activities' comparatively to Europe in the 18th century. (P.454) Elvin has shed a spotlight on the expensive cost of environmental restoration with the support from 'Particularities' that environment was completely and fully utilized, in order to support his arguments that Chinese environmental 'pressure' is dangerously high which is greater than northwestern Europe.

Last but not least, Mark Elvin provided concrete evidence and statistics to strengthen his arguments. He also translated Chinese primary sources, such as Chinese Poetry, largely found in the chapters in section 3, the 'Perceptions'. The sources he used are new and original. For instances, He quoted the description of the environment in Chinese poetries. Although they were not directly related to the main arguments he had, the credibility of the evidence is trustworthy since the Chinese literati didn't compose the poem for beautifying the environment but instead, using the raw and real environment to express their thoughts and feelings.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)